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ASIA PROGRAMME

# GERMAN EXPEDITION TO TIBET (1938-1939)

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ASIA FOCUS #153



In 1938, five German scientists embarked on an extraordinary quest. They risked their lives crossing the highest mountains in the world to reach one of the most remote kingdoms: Tibet. The scientific expedition was officially tasked with researching the zoology and anthropology of the country. But eventually, the data collected for the SS<sup>1</sup> would serve a much darker purpose. Their secret mission was to discover the origins of the Aryan race, and the vestiges of this civilization, which would have disappeared on the roof of the world. This endeavour would allow the Nazis to rewrite history and forge a new past, allowing them to legitimize the new world they claimed to set up at the time: that of a pure Reich, to last 1,000 years.

The expedition, led by Heinrich Himmler, was under the direction of the *Ahnenerbe Forschungs und Lehrgemeinschaft*, the Society for Research and Education on Ancestral Inheritance. This multidisciplinary research institute sought to study the sphere, the spirit, the achievements and the heritage of the Nordic Indo-European race, with archaeological research, racial anthropology and cultural history of the Aryan race. Its aim was to prove the validity of Nazi theories on the racial superiority of the Aryans over supposedly inferior races, as well as to Germanize the sufficiently pure inhabitants of the Nazi *Lebensraum*.

## **ERNST SCHÄFER GERMAN EXPEDITION TO TIBET, UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF REICHSFÜHRER-SS HIMMLER AND IN CONNECTION WITH THE AHNENERBE AT THE ORIGIN: THE AVAILABILITY OF A MILITARY NAVIGATION SERVICE TO THE CIVILIAN SECTOR FOR SECURITY PURPOSE**

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The expedition consisted of five members: Edmund Geer (*Untersturmführer*<sup>2</sup>), technical director of the expedition, Bruno Beger (*Untersturmführer*) anthropologist, ethnologist,

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<sup>1</sup> Short for *Schutzstaffel*, protection squadron, a Nazi paramilitary and police organization founded in 1925 to provide personal protection to Adolf Hitler at first, and which quickly became one of the most effective and deadly instruments of Nazi terror. See Steinert Marlis, *The Black Order of the SS*, L'Histoire, January 1989, n° 118.

<sup>2</sup> second lieutenant in the SS.

geomagnetologist and geographer, Karl Wienert (*Untersturmführer*) geophysicist and meteorologist, Ernst Krause (*Untersturmführer*) botanist, entomologist<sup>3</sup>, cameraman and photographer and Ernst Schäfer (*Obersturmführer*) zoologist specializing in ornithology. Initially, Krause and Wienert were not members of the SS, but were appointed automatically when they joined the expedition team<sup>4</sup>.

Ernst Schäfer handled the political and diplomatic preparations for the trip on his own. He persuaded Himmler that in light of the international situation at the time, the way to Tibet could only be made from India, then under British rule: it was therefore necessary to obtain British authorization. Thanks to his diplomatic skills, he obtained letters of recommendation from various personalities: Sir Francis Sykes, Sir John Anderson, Lord Zetland, JE Pryde-Hughes, Sir Francis Younghusband, Lord Astor (bowman of the Cliveden Set, a Germanophile aristocratic club), Frank Wallace or Saunolt Kaulback<sup>5</sup>. Their support was essential in putting pressure on the British government and securing the precious keyword to allow the members of the team to disembark in India. Members of the expedition did not know whether it would be possible for them to enter the then independent Kingdom of Tibet, either at the start of their journey or during the first months of their stay in India.

It was not until November 1938, after long negotiations and thanks to Schäfer's good preparatory work, that he received an invitation from the Tibetan government, which also included a permit to stay in the Forbidden City of Lhasa. Initially, this authorization to stay in the city was to last only two weeks, but it was continually extended, so that the German researchers ended up staying there for two months. They were also the first Germans to be able to enter Lhasa.

This result, impressive in light of the difficulties of the time, was mainly due to the work and personal perseverance of Ernst Schäfer and his companions, rather than to the hypothetical action of the SS and *Ahnenerbe*.

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<sup>3</sup> insect specialist.

<sup>4</sup> United States Forces - European Theater, Military Intelligence Service Center, APO 757 Final Interrogation Report (OI-FIR), *The Activities of Dr. Ernst Schaefer*, 12 February 1946.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.,

«Ernst Schäfer, when he organized this expedition, always emphasized his independence and his personal initiatives; he always wanted to set this business in motion on his own, as far as it was possible. In these steps, he also, of course, played the card of his SS contacts, used them and mobilized them, as long as it could be useful or proved necessary. "»<sup>6</sup>

On April 20, 1938, the five German scientists embarked in Genoa on the *Gneisenau*, a fast ship, which called at ports in the Far East. They passed through Colombo and arrived in Calcutta on May 13 of that year. The German press then seized the opportunity to break the hitherto well-kept secret about the expedition. Learning of the patronage of the SS, the Anglo-Indian press published articles hostile to the latter. Schäfer, however, obtained the support of the English Foreign Minister, Sir Aubrey Metcalfe and the Viceroy of India, Lord Linlithgow<sup>7</sup>, and applied to the Lhasa government for permission to enter Tibet<sup>8</sup>. Schäfer received a telegram from the Consul General in Calcutta, informing him that the Tibetan government refused permission for the expedition to enter Tibet<sup>9</sup>.

Indeed, the English government had every reason to be concerned about the arrival of a German expedition to one of its colonies. In 1938, Hitler's aggressive policy had already begun to destabilize Europe and the Munich Agreements of September 29 and 30, 1938 allowed English Prime Minister Chamberlain (1869-1940) and the President of the French Council Daladier (1884-1970), to save the peace *in-extremis*. Hitler obtained Czechoslovakia and the annexation of the Sudetenland (German-speaking Czechs), what saved Schäfer's expedition was this climate of appeasement sought by England and France. The Nazis had now become far too powerful to be thwarted in their European annexation project.

<sup>6</sup> Mierau Peter, *Nationalsozialistische Expeditionspolitik. Deutsche Asien-Expeditionen 1933-1945*, Munich, 2006 (PhD thesis from the University of Munich, defended in 2003), p. 331.

<sup>7</sup> United States Forces - European Theater, Military Intelligence Service Center, APO 757 Final Interrogation Report (OI-FIR), *The Activities of Dr Ernst Schaefer*, 12 février 1946.

<sup>8</sup> Beger Bruno, *The Status of Independence of Tibet in 1938/39 according to the travel reports*, Mémoires, site of the Tibetan government in exile, tibet.com, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Engelhardt Isrun, *The Ernst-Schaefer-Tibet-Expedition (1938-1939): new light on the political history of Tibet in the first half of the 20th century*, in McKay Alex (ed.), *Tibet and Her Neighbours : A History*, Edition Hansjörg Mayer, London, 2003, p. 189.

## PROGRESS OF THE EXPEDITION

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Arriving in Sikkim, a semi-independent state in northeastern India bordering the Himalayas, the Nazi expedition found itself stranded and could no longer continue its journey into neighbouring Tibet. Despite the letters of recommendation, the British government banned Schäfer and his team from entering Tibet (an independent state at the time). In order to circumvent this ban, Schäfer discreetly crossed the border and established close links with the local authorities there.

On January 19, 1939, Schäfer and his team finally arrived in Lhasa. They settled there initially for two weeks but managed to stay for more than two months thanks to the renewal of their permits<sup>10</sup>.

The expedition proved to be a success, both in terms of the quantity of material collected and the improvement in diplomatic relations between Germany and Tibet. This improvement was explained by several reasons, such as the fact that Bruno Beger, the anthropologist of the expedition, had received a short medical training. This enabled him to effectively treat members of the Tibetan aristocracy (in particular their teeth).

In reality, the choice to approach the elites of the country was not trivial. The SS officers of the expedition did not forget their primary mission: to collect evidence that Germans and Tibetans might have common origins and, to a lesser extent, be able to influence political and military decisions in Lhasa. For Bruno Beger, the SS was fascinated by racial theories, it was time to take a look at Tibetans proper. In return for their care, he took the measurements of 376 individuals, made casts of the heads, faces, hands and ears of 17 others, and took the fingerprints and handprints of 350 others.

Schäfer saw Tibet as the place to practise his passion for hunting, collecting real plants and animals. He thus discovered the *Schapi*, a previously unknown wild goat, and tracked down another legendary creature of the region: the Yeti. He was the first to hypothesize

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<sup>10</sup> Engelhardt Isrun, *The Ernst-Schaefer-Tibet-Expedition (1938-1939): new light on the political history of Tibet in the first half of the 20th century*, in McKay Alex (ed.), *Tibet and Her Neighbours: A History*, Edition Hansjörg Mayer, London, 2003, p.190.

that the *Abominable Snowman* was actually a species of bear, a theory that still enjoys consensus among scientists specializing in the subject.

Although Himmler repeatedly tried to rally, the scientists of the expedition to his cause - namely to follow in the footsteps that the ancestors of the Aryans had left in the Tibetan caves - Schäfer continued to refuse to enter into these mystical considerations. He, as well as the other members of the expedition, always put forward their scientific training to explain the reasons for their enterprise. In Mutti's *SS in Tibet*, we learn that the official aims of the expedition were to study the Tibetan regions geographically, geologically, zoologically, anthropologically, botanically, and culturally, and to contact local authorities with a view to establishing a German representation in the country<sup>11</sup>.

Today, the debate is heated and has divided historians on the real motivations of the German government of the day to send an expedition, headed by the SS, to a remote country as far away as Tibet. Four main reasons stand out: political, racial, military or scientific.

From a political point of view, Claudio Mutti advanced Himmler's willingness to contact the regent of Tibet, Réting Rinpoche, which Schäfer's team succeeded in doing<sup>12</sup>. Laurent Dispot supported his idea, seeing it as a way of making Lhasa a strategic node on the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis<sup>13</sup>. This possibility was quickly refuted by four Tibetologists, such as Anne-Marie Blondeau, Katia Buffertrille, Heather Stoddard or even Françoise Robin who saw it as a myth relayed by the Chinese government to further discredit the Tibetan government in exile since the annexation of Tibet to the People's Republic of China in 1951<sup>14</sup>.

From a military point of view, the Austrian weekly *Woche*n*pres*s*e*, published between 1955 and 1993, posited that the first task of the expedition was to study the possibility of making Tibet a base from which to attack British troops stationed in India.

<sup>11</sup> Mutti Claudio, *SS in Tibet*, claudiomutti.com, 10 octobre 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Dispot Laurent, *The Dalai Lama and the Nazi horror*, Libération, 6 mai 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Blondeau, Buffertrille, Robin, Stoddard, *Response on the links between the Dalai Lama and the Nazis*, Libération, 6 May 2008.

From a eugenic point of view, the French anthropologist Édouard Conte, director of research at the CNRS in 1995, asserted that Schäfer's mission had the ideological objective of seeking to prove certain racist theses on the origins of the Aryan race. The measurements of the skulls of Tibetan people and the moulding of their faces carried out by Bruno Beger served this main purpose. This interpretation of the expedition was questioned in 2006 by Rose Detlev, a German historian specialized in debunking Nazism's supposed links with secret societies<sup>15</sup>.

Therefore, it would seem that the reasons for the Nazi expedition to Tibet were most likely for scientific purposes. In her book, *The German Expedition to Tibet of 1938-39: Scientific Journey or Search for Traces of Ideologically Motivated?*, Rose Detlev suggests a rigorously scientific approach on the part of the expedition and Bruno Beger, who carried out anthropomorphic measurements while respecting the medical and biological standards of the time. It also relies on the fact that Beger's writings do not use Nazi terms, such as Aryan<sup>16</sup>.

The aim of the German expedition to Tibet in 1938-1939 was therefore to obtain a comprehensive and scientific synthesis of what Tibet was, as a whole. There was no clue as to any other motives or goals in the reports written by the expedition members, which described their actions in Tibet in full and in detail<sup>17</sup>. The image they gave of Tibet ended with a summary of the results obtained by their research, accompanied by a meticulous list of all their activities and the samples taken, as well as the text of a presentation given by Schäfer in Calcutta. Their results included reports on telluric magnetism, temperatures, the salinity of the lakes, the blueprints of the buildings visited, the cartography relating to geological structures, the samples of stones and minerals, fossils discovered, animal skeletons, reptiles, butterflies and birds, dried plants, seeds of flowers, cereals and fruits, to which were added various objects to the attention of ethnologists, such as tools and pieces of cloth. Furthermore, 20,000 black and white photographs, 2,000

<sup>15</sup> See Delpha François, *A Third Reich History*, Perrin, 2014, p. 253-254.

<sup>16</sup> Rose Detlev, *The German Expedition to Tibet of 1938-39: Scientific Journey or Quest for Traces with Ideologically Motivated?*, Deutschland in Geschichte und Gegenwart, Bruxelles-Munich-Tübingen, Synergies européenne, n° 3, November 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Schäfer Ernst, *Geheimnis Tibet. Erster Bericht der Deutschen Tibet-Expedition Ernst Schäfer 1938-39, Schirmherr: Reichsführer SS*, München 1943 in Beger Bruno, *Mit der deutschen Tibetexpedition Ernst Schäfer 1938/39 nach Lhasa*, Wiesbaden, 1998, page 6 (Bruno Beger's travel notes).



colour photographs, and 18,000 meters of film (more than fifty hours worth <sup>18</sup>with which the explorers made an official documentary<sup>19</sup> upon their return), were also included.

## **MULTIPLE EFFECTS IN GERMANY**

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The expedition left Tibet in August 1939, with two letters of courtesy from the Regent for Hitler and for Himmler. They also left with a llama's coat and a hunting dog for the *Führer*<sup>20</sup> as well as precious objects, rare animals and the Kangyur (Tibetan Bible), which had been offered to them in Lhasa, in exchange for the good care given to the population by anthropologist Beger<sup>21</sup>. Upon arrival in Calcutta, Schäfer's team boarded a seaplane that reached Berlin Tempelhof Airport via Baghdad. At the foot of the landing strip awaited Heinrich Himmler, happy to greet them in person.

Once back in Germany, the fate of the members of the expedition varied: Wienert (meteorologist), Krause (botanist) and Geer (technical director) returned to civilian life and history does not remember their names<sup>22</sup>.

On the other hand, for Schäfer and Beger, the Nazi regime allowed them to continue their research. In 1942, Schäfer was promoted to *Sturmbannführer* (major)<sup>23</sup> in the SS and was entrusted with the management of the brand-new Institute for Asian Studies *Sven Hedin Institut für Inner Asien und Expeditionen* (Sven Hedin Institute for Central Asia and Expeditions) in tribute to the Swedish explorer. In 1943, the film *Geheimnis Tibet* (Secret Tibet) was also released, based on the 50 hours of films shot in Tibet. It was screened on the occasion of the official inauguration of the Sven Hedin Institute on January 16, 1943, in the presence of the Swedish explorer himself. The latter, enthused, exclaimed: «

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<sup>18</sup> Mierau Peter, *Nationalsozialistische Expeditionspolitik. Deutsche Asien-Expeditionen 1933-1945*, Munich, 2006 (PhD thesis from the University of Munich, defended in 2003), p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Film edited by Marco Dolcetta, *Nationalsozialismus und Okkultismus*, 1994.

<sup>20</sup> United States Forces - European Theater, Military Intelligence Service Center, « APO 757 - *The Activities of Dr. Ernst Schaefer*, Final Interrogation Report, n°32, 12 February 1946.

<sup>21</sup> Hale Christopher, *Himmler's Crusade. The Nazi Expedition to Find the Origins of the Aryan Race*, Hoboken, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Cummins Joseph, *History's Great Untold stories*, National Geographic, 2006, p. 333.

<sup>23</sup> Levenda Peter, *Unholy alliance : a history of Nazi involvement with the occult*, New York, Continuum, 2nd Edition, 2002, p. 193.

*Grandiose, marvellous, what we have seen here!* » and turning to Schäfer said: “*You are the man who should continue my research*”<sup>24</sup>.

In 1945, Schäfer was captured by the Allies in Munich. Being an officer of a criminal organization, the SS, he was interned for three years as part of the denazification of Germany, before obtaining a *persilschein* (certification of exemption: a Nazi who could be exonerated by declarations of victims or former enemies and thus acquire a reputation good enough to meet the Allies' demands for release). Schäfer downplayed his ties to the regime and claimed that neither politics nor ideology were included in his scientific research. He claimed that he had become an SS, driven only by the desire to obtain the means to carry out his research and that he had found himself “*caught in a spider's web*” without his knowledge. He got away with a simple fine<sup>25</sup>.

In 1949, Schäfer moved to Venezuela to establish an animal park and in 1956 he joined the faculty of the Central University of Caracas as head of the biological station at Rancho Rio Grande. At the same time, he became scientific advisor to the former King of the Belgians Leopold III (1901-1983) and undertook a research trip to the Belgian Congo to make a film on the gorillas, *Herrscher des Urwalds* (Lords of the Jungle), released in 1958. In 1959 he retired from the University of Caracas and became the curator of the natural history section of the Lower Saxony State Museum in Hanover <sup>26</sup> from 1960 to 1970.

Anthropologist Bruno Beger took a much darker turn upon his return to Germany. In December 1941, he proposed to the head of the *Ahnenerbe*, Wolfram Sievers, to build a collection of Jewish skulls as part of his anthropological research<sup>27</sup>. With the two men unable to agree on the custodian of the macabre collection, it was Heinrich Himmler who asked them to select 150 Jews to recover their skeletons. Beger complied, choosing deportees of different ethnic types to provide doctor Auguste Hirt with the bodies upon which he could carry out his experiments at the Natzweiler-Struthof camp in Alsace. 115 deportees were thus sent from Auschwitz to Natzweiler to be gassed there and then

<sup>24</sup> Trimondi Victor and Victoria, *The Nazi-Tibet Connection, Critical and Creative Cultural Debate*, Trimondi Online Magazine, iivs.de.

<sup>25</sup> Brewis Kathy, *Quest of the Nazis*, The Sunday Times, July 20, 2003 (on the SS Expedition to Tibet and the career of Schäfer, from Christopher Hale's book, *Himmler's Crusade*).

<sup>26</sup> Brewis Kathy, *Quest of the Nazis*, The Sunday Times, July 20, 2003 (on the SS Expedition to Tibet and the career of Schäfer, from Christopher Hale's book, *Himmler's Crusade*).

<sup>27</sup> Janouin-Benanti Serge, *If they are men... - The doctors of Struthof*, 3rd editions, 2016, p. 112.

transferred to the *Reichsuniversität* where Hirt butchered them, to transform their remains into skeletons, and to create a collection for the identification of the Jewish race<sup>28</sup>. At the end of the war, the Ahnenerbe always omitted its role in their transformation into skeletons<sup>29</sup>. Of these 115 deportees, Beger allegedly reserved a few for his personal use and had them sent to Mittersill Castle in Austria, home of the Sven-Hedin Institute<sup>30</sup>. The anthropologist affirmed, in a letter to Himmler in April 1943, his approval to « *liquidate the Jews in Europe and, beyond, throughout the world if possible* ».<sup>31</sup>

At the end of the war, no court was able to collect sufficient corroborating evidence to imprison Bruno Beger: the only leader of the Ahnenerbe. Wolfram Sievers, was hanged for crimes against humanity<sup>32</sup>. In 1960, an investigation of August Hirt's collection of Jewish skeletons resulted in Beger's imprisonment for four months, pending his trial, held ten years later in 1970. During his trial, Beger said he was unaware of the fate awaited by the Jews he selected based on their measurements at Auschwitz. The court found him guilty of complicity in the murder of 86 Jews in the concentration camps, but he was only sentenced to three years in prison, the minimum<sup>33</sup>.

In 1986, Beger published *Meine Begegnungen mit dem Ozean des Wissens* (My Encounters with the Ocean of Wisdom) which recounts his numerous encounters with the Dalai Lama, notably one in London where he co-signed, with Heinrich Harrer, a document affirming that Tibet was indeed a fully sovereign state in 1950<sup>34</sup>. Beger died peacefully on October 12, 2009, in Germany.

Despite these facts, debates remain open among historians as to whether Schäfer was a Nazi by conviction or by expediency. Historians like the German Isrun Englehardt or the New Zealander Alex MacKay tend to fuel the debate on the real Nazism of Schäfer. MacKay, in the introduction to his book, *Tibet and her Neighbours: A History*, considers Schäfer to

<sup>28</sup> See Hilberg Raoul, *The Destruction of the Jews of Europe*, Fayard, 1988.

<sup>29</sup> Reilly J. John, Review of Christopher Hale's Book, *Himmler's Crusade*, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken (NJ), 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Janouin-Benanti Serge, *If they are men... - The doctors of Struthof*, 3rd editions, 2016, p. 182.

<sup>31</sup> Croston Roger, *Review of The Secret of History of Doctor Bruno Beger : The Nazi Expedition*, Channel 4, 2004, Ofcom.

<sup>32</sup> Pringle Heather, *The Master Plan : Himmler's Scholar and the Holocaust*, Hyperion, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Buffet Charlie, *Controversy around the hero of Jean-Jacques Annaud's film. A Nazi in Tibet, Heinrich Harrer, the Austrian mountaineer played by Brad Pitt in Seven Years in Tibet, was an SS, not by circumstance, as he denies, but by conviction*, Liberation, October 1997.

<sup>34</sup> Tibet Office, *Tibetan Government in Exile, Statement by Westerners who visited Tibet before 1949*, London, 2011.

be a serious scientist and apparently a reluctant Nazi<sup>35</sup>. In fact, in 1932, Schäfer was elected a member of the American National Academy of Sciences, and he retained this distinction for life. Despite his interrogation by Allied forces in Germany in 1946, as well as the records found on the 1938 Tibet expedition to the ruins of the Reich, Schäfer was never convicted and his skills as a zoologist and explorer were never transmitted. The United States could have done it, however, given that Schäfer was not one of these German scientists, taken to the other side of the Atlantic for their work, in exchange for forgetting the experiments they had conducted during the war.

## CONCLUSION

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«*What the populace wanted was access to history, even at the cost of self-destruction.* »

<sup>36</sup>Hannah Arendt perfectly summed up what the Nazis and the main leaders of the regime had tried to do: steal an entire people its history, its roots, its beliefs, to rewrite them, transform them and take over its culture, for its own sake; 'force them to start from scratch by removing their reference points and their memory.

The Nazi Tibet Expedition was half-successful, as it brought back to Germany a tremendous testimony to all that could be found in the country in the 1930s, but it deprived Himmler of compelling scientific evidence of the origins of the Aryan race.

On the religious level, it would seem that Himmler was relatively isolated in his project to create a political religion <sup>37</sup>specific to the Third Reich. On the eve of the Second World War, the regime's paramount concern was to prevent against any member's resistance and the perfect alignment of the Church, particularly the Protestant Church, which surely remained one of the most influential organizations among the German masses. At a time when the Vatican archives tended to be open, it was the inaction of its members that was mostly in order, in the face of the reprisals that the religious dissidents of the regime could experience.

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<sup>35</sup> MacKay, *Tibet and her neighbours : a history*, Londres, Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 2003, Introduction.

<sup>36</sup> Arendt Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism : The Totalitarian System*, Seuil, 1998.

<sup>37</sup> See the writings of historian Emilio Gentile on this subject.

In the long term, two possibilities were offered to the German Reich: the pure and simple eradication of religion, leaving room only for the Nazi regime and its propaganda (the most plausible option) or the creation of a new dogma, of a political religion, the sole purpose of which would have been to serve the regime. Based on Himmler's considerations, this dogma would be created from scratch, drawing on tales and legends from the oldest Nordic and Germanic beliefs. The central importance of this dogma would have been established on the basis of irrefutable scientific evidence, hence the numerous German expeditions around the world during the inter-war period. The Christian benchmarks of society would have been erased in favour of a new pagan ideology, led by the *Führer*. A whole new symbolism would have been created (festivals, places of pilgrimage, historical figures) in order to offer people elements in which they could believe. It was not only the SS who wanted this; all of Germany was embarking on this path. From 1933, the Nazis imposed the commemoration of the *Blutzeuge* (martyrs) of November, in memory of the members of the NSDAP killed during the failed Putsch of the Brewery on November 8 and 9, 1923. Subsequently, the *Blutfahne* ceremony (flag of blood) was also created, during which Adolf Hitler consecrated the new flags and pennants of the party and of the SS, with the flag stained with the blood of the putschists who died in 1923. This flag acquired the rank of a relic and was religiously kept in the *Fahnenhalle* of the Brown House, at the Munich headquarters of the Nazi Party from 1920 to 1945.

However, towards the end of the war and with the collapse of the Reich, the Nazi administration attempted to remove evidence of its monstrous experiments and mass murder. The vast majority of the *Ahnenerbe* archives were burned, hence the difficulty of studying the sources concerning the Nazi expedition to Tibet to flesh out the (often subjective) testimonies and accounts, of the team members, now deceased. These sources were sent to the United States in the aftermath of the war and today form an important

foundation for Ernst Schäfer's expedition<sup>38</sup>. Any role that Himmler's organization could play in flames vanished, and his memory died with the disappearance of its members. The death of mountaineer Heinrich Harrer in 2006, who had met Sven Hedin in 1952, marked the end of these twentieth-century Tibetan epics, which remain the source of many contemporary reflections in many ways.

Today, the expedition still feeds many fantasies and Nazi esotericism, which constitutes a dark side that is very difficult to explain and understand, and still inspires adventure novels like Eugen's Uricaru *Weight of an Angel*<sup>39</sup> or even *Operation Shambhala, of the SS in the land of the Dalai Lamas* by Gilles Van Grasdorff<sup>40</sup>. ■

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<sup>38</sup> United States Forces - European Theater, Military Intelligence Service Center, APO 757 Final Interrogation Report (OI-FIR), *The Activities of Dr Ernst Schaefer*, 12 février 1946.

<sup>39</sup> Uricaru Eugen, *The Weight of an Angel*, Black on White, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Grasdorff Van Gilles, *Operation Shambhala - From the S.S. to the land of the Dalai Llamas*, Presses du Châtelet, 2012.

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**GERMAN EXPEDITION TO TIBET (1938-1939)**

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**ASIA FOCUS**

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